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ABSTRACT

Taking off from the perception that the current critical climate blurs most meaningful distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, this book examines what happens when writers and readers encounter texts presented as nonfiction--texts that make some truth claim on outside experience, texts whose characters and events have at least some tangible dimension outside the written word. Rather than attempting to establish distinctions between abstract notions of fiction and nonfiction, the book examines the experience of engaging with both kinds of texts. The author contends that reading and writing nonfiction is fundamentally different from reading and writing even the most strongly realistic fiction. The difference between the two stems from a recognition that actual subjects are linked to nonfiction texts. An author may try to hide the link by withholding names or changing details, and scholars may try to ignore the link as somehow tainting a purely literary experience, but nonfiction's operations defeat those efforts. While authors of fiction build worlds that encompass their characters and narratives, a nonfiction text always competes with the lives and events that lie outside it, lives and events it cannot contain. How this inside/outside contest plays over a variety of nonfictional texts is examined, ranging from 19th-century narratives by Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew through the writings of Sigmund Freud, John Reed, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion, culminating in a discussion of Tim O'Brien, who has written stories of his experience in the Vietnam War in hybrid combinations of fiction and nonfiction. (NKA)

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